

Agency: Commerce, Community and Economic Development**Grants to Named Recipients (AS 37.05.316)****Grant Recipient: Alaska Judicial Observers, Inc.****Federal Tax ID: 22-3864369****Project Title:**

Alaska Judicial Observers, Inc. - Recruit/Screen/Train Volunteers to Observe Court Proceedings

State Funding Requested: \$ 54,000**House District: Anchorage Areawide (17-32)**

Future Funding May Be Requested

Brief Project Description:

Observe Court Proceedings and to Record/Report to Judicial Council.

Funding Plan:**Total Cost of Project: \$54,000**Funding Secured*Amount FY*Other Pending Requests*Amount FY*Anticipated Future Need*Amount FY*

There is no other funding needed

Detailed Project Description and Justification:

To recruit/screen and train volunteers who go into court rooms and observe the court proceedings. Once the trial is finished the volunteers record and report their data to Alaska Judicial Council. The Alaska Judicial Observers, Inc., and Alaska Judicial Council share this information for various things, including information put on the ballot whether to retain a judge on the bench.

Project Timeline:

2008

Entity Responsible for the Ongoing Operation and Maintenance of this Project:

Alaska Judicial Observers, Inc.

Grant Recipient Contact Information:

Contact Name: Kathleen Rice

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Has this project been through a public review process at the local level and is it a community priority? ☐ Yes ☒ No

Alaska Judicial Observers, Inc. Program Information

Alaska Judicial Observers, Inc. (AJO) is not affiliated with any advocacy, defense, prosecution or civil liberties group. We are the only independent court observer program in Alaska and one of a handful in the United States. It is because of this independence that we are able to collect neutral, unbiased evaluations and provide to the Alaska Judicial Council and the people of Alaska a report that reflects the citizen's perspective of judicial performance.

AJO produces a Biennial Report in even numbered years that sets out the results of evaluations conducted by its volunteers. AJO shares this report with the Alaska Judicial Council. Council members consider the report when they recommend whether voters should retain judges in office. The report is available to the public. This helps to enhance judicial accountability and promotes the public's understanding of the court system. AJO also provides the report to judges to help them improve their performance. Although AJO's primary function is to evaluate judges, we also evaluate attorneys and make their evaluations available to them upon request.

Volunteers are screened to ensure that they have not been a victim of a violent crime, have no criminal background and have no cases pending before the courts. Accompanied by the Executive Director or Assistant Director, each volunteer goes through approximately 40 hours of classroom and courtroom training. Neutrality and objectivity are emphasized, as are the role of the observer to maintain an impartial attitude and to never make a personal judgment of guilt or innocence.

The criteria used for AJO's judicial evaluations have been reviewed by the Alaska Judicial Council. An evaluation form is filled out by the observer following each proceeding and volunteers are encouraged to include comments that reinforce their ratings. These comments are meant to be constructive, to help better shape an efficient and professional process and to assist legal professionals in showing sensitivity to any special needs of the public.

Alaska Judicial Observers attend educational workshops. Workshop topics have included sentencing, bail bonding, electronic trial preparation, jail tours and a question and answer session with the Khabarovsk delegation.

AJO has also been honored to participate in the Community Connections Program at the American Russian Center at UAA and the Khabarovsk-Alaska Rule of Law Partnership by holding court observer training sessions for their delegations.

AJO was included in the Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System (University of Denver) study and was noted as "a sophisticated program of independent judicial observers, who compile annual reports on each judge".

We are proud to have been asked to train volunteers from the Illinois League of Women Voters in May 2008 so that they may start an independent program. They will pay for all expenses and make a donation to AJO for our assistance.

All Grant funding will be used to recruit, screen, train volunteers to observe court proceedings and to record and report those judicial evaluations to the Alaska Judicial Council and the citizens of Alaska.

Shared Expectations

Judicial Accountability in Context

INSTITUTE FOR THE
ADVANCEMENT
OF THE AMERICAN
LEGAL SYSTEM

■ UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

and "should only be used as a signal of a potential issue with a judge."⁷⁴ Particular caution is warranted because Alaska permits one peremptory disqualification as of right in each case; by rule, the parties may not specify the grounds for the disqualification.⁷⁵ Accordingly, one or more disqualifications may be entirely unrelated to concerns about bias or efficient handling of the case.

10) *Information obtained from public hearings.* The Judicial Council holds statewide public hearings for all judges standing for retention, both in person and by teleconference.⁷⁶

11) *Reports from judicial observers.* Finally, Alaska has a sophisticated program of independent judicial observers, who compile annual reports on each judge.⁷⁷ Multiple observers – often as many as fifteen – are assigned to each judge.⁷⁸ The observers are given approximately forty hours of advance training, and are instructed to sit in on court proceedings at unscheduled intervals.⁷⁹ They observe both civil and criminal cases, and review all courtroom activities, from jury trials to motion hearings and arraignments. Observers provide both numerical evaluations and written comments in response to straightforward questions about the judge's behavior, such as "Did the judge pay close attention to the testimony?" and "Did you understand the judge's explanations and decisions, or did you leave feeling confused?"⁸⁰ For each judge, data from all the observers is compiled into a one-page evaluation. The evaluation sets out the total number of hours observed, the number of observers, the types of cases observed, and the average rating the judge received in each category.⁸¹ This information is submitted to the Alaska Judicial Council to include in its overall evaluation of the judge.⁸²

⁷⁴ *Id.* at 3.

⁷⁴ *Id.* at 3.
⁷⁵ ALASKA CIV. R. 42(c). See also Maria N. Greenstein, *Judicial Disqualification in Alaska Courts*, 17 ALASKA L. REV. 53, 61-62 (2000).

⁷⁶ See Retention Evaluation Information, *supra* note 69.

⁷¹ See ALASKA JUDICIAL OBSERVERS 2006 BIENNIAL REPORT, at 1 (on file with author), available at <http://www.sjc.state.ak.us/Retention2006/JudicialObservers2006.pdf>.

⁷⁶ See *id.* at 3.

⁷⁹ See *id.* at 2.

⁸⁰ *Id.* at 5-6.